

## Editorial: spectro-geographies

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# Editorial: spectro-geographies

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The vocabulary of spectrality has arrived late to geography. This themed set seeks to pull out some of the topics emerging as part of a broader engagement with spectrality within geography and the arts, humanities and social sciences. We suggest that a careful attunement to the ghostly, spectral and the absent, can be a particularly powerful and emancipatory way of dealing with a number of problematics central to contemporary geographical thought.

Despite the taunts of those who would prefer geography to be concerned with the 'rational', the 'ordered' and the 'sane', a reading of geography's outputs over the last few years suggests that there are a set of social theories that are now becoming increasingly important to understanding a whole host of spatial and social relationships: a concern with the most *spectral* aspects of space.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising given our increasing subjection to media images of death and vulnerability, from 9/11,<sup>2</sup> to the Asian Tsunami, the New Orleans floods and the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Whilst commentators proudly proclaimed the end of history at the close of the twentieth century where all moments in time are neatly ordered and 'in their rightful place',<sup>3</sup> the twenty-first century has so far transpired as a century of haunting; of irregular, unexpected and (un)anticipated events that appear to be 'beyond the real'.<sup>4</sup> These events continue to reverberate in and around places long after they have occurred so that time is rendered 'out of joint'.<sup>5</sup>

Derrida's reading of 'endist' writers and thinkers in contemporary society, such as Fukuyama, is that such sentiments are merely 'ideological confidence tricks' which play a central role in suppression of political opposition by those in power. Hence his influential and iconoclastic work *Spectres of Marx* shows how not just one, but plural, spectres of Marx (plural, since Marxism Derrida argues, is open to interpretation and revision in response to changing cultural conditions) continue to haunt the 'endist' paradigm of western liberal democracy which has 'triumphed' over communism (and by implication, over Marxism too). In response to the 'good news' that ideological conflict is no longer a problem since the ideal of liberal democracy cannot be improved upon, Derrida argues that the 'triumph has never been so critical, fragile, threatened, even in certain regards catastrophic, and in sum bereaved'.<sup>6</sup> Derrida's 'hauntology' unpicks how there is neither a beginning nor an end to history and thus Marxism, despite the supposed triumph of capitalist liberal democracy.

The term 'spectro-geographies' is chosen by the editors of this themed set as a deliberate reference to Derrida's spectro-politics. The papers in this themed set emerge from a session at the IBG-RGS in 2005 in which we sought to add depth to understandings of the *spatial frameworks and processes* through which Derrida's spectro-politics might operate. If

spectrality has a temporal politics, then it also has a spatial politics, one which we would argue, is complex, uneven and multifaceted.

Outwith this themed set, evidence of a nascent engagement in geography is all around in the form of book length research on phantasmagorias in the city,<sup>7</sup> traces of life woven through urban industrial ruins and the ghosts of dereliction,<sup>8</sup> the uncanny resonance of subaltern post-colonial histories,<sup>9</sup> the haunting fictional myths that saturate southern California's regional identity,<sup>10</sup> the 'extra-geographies' of Fortean science,<sup>11</sup> and the role of macabre, impossible spaces of 'horror writing' in marking a threshold between the known and unknown.<sup>12</sup> A whole swathe of upcoming work situates itself within this unfolding concern for the just perceptible, the barely there, the nagging presence of an absence in a variety of spaces from infant burial grounds, to genocide museums and even the haunting of the private spaces of the home.

Nevertheless, the engagement with spectral matters is in its infancy. Since the publication of *Spectres of Marx*, there has been increasing awareness of a 'spectralized amnesiac modernity with its delusional totalizing systems'.<sup>13</sup> However, the spectre is used widely within academic thought without full examination of its theoretical consequences.<sup>14</sup>

A clear set of issues, which may benefit from the application of the currently dissonant collection of theories of spectrality has yet to be defined. The words 'haunting' and 'spectrality' are also often used loosely and without clear definition. Furthermore, the current debate remains murky and disconnected. Not that this is a bad thing, but there is need to move *beyond* the use of spectres as just narrative, metaphorical or allegorical devices. Through varied geographical and substantive case studies this themed set gives a tentative shape and form to a number of different ways by which we can understand haunting. In doing so, it examines what this typology might mean for the practice of geography as a discipline.

We see the central contribution of this collection and works within the field of spectrality and space as feeding into, yet also problematizing, the geographies of the 'more than representational' in several ways.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing on diverse case studies from ghost stories and literature, to the act of the séance and from the walk to work, the papers in this issue set out a number of issues that coalesce around several different themes. The first theme to emerge is that of *temporality*. Alerting our attention to *the already passed* and even the *not-yet*,<sup>16</sup> papers in this issue unsettle 'taken for granted' relationships that occur along a linear temporality. For John Wylie, the ghostly 'confounds settled orders of past and present'.<sup>17</sup> Within these papers, spectro-geographies are relations that may speak through texts, things, objects and practices, and more than meta-narratives and overarching ideologies. Papers in this collection suggest how ghostly relations tangle up the string of temporal linearity. Pasts and futures, to paraphrase Wylie once more, bare a supplementary relation to the present. Spaces and times are folded, allowing distant presences, events, people and things to become rather more intimate.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding spectrality can not only help us come to terms with the 'impassible'<sup>19</sup> mess of these ties, connections and relations – but also how people *do* come to terms with the erosion of an over-determined sure footing of certainty. The figure of the ghost is often used as a means of apprehending that which we cannot explain, do not expect, understand, or struggle to represent; as Dixon suggests it is a matter of how 'to live and cope with the notion of uncertainty'.<sup>20</sup> Holloway and Kneale's article, in particular, examines ghost hunting through spectral stories and the spiritualist practice of the séance. Such ghost hunting

performances and spectral accounts emerge as ways of *making sense* and even anticipating unexpected and indeterminable happenings.<sup>21</sup> For many of the papers in this issue, ghostly geographies may be read as ways to understand the kaleidoscopic modes of experiencing uncanny agencies, unforeseen events and a morphology of almost there-ness.

But while concerns with the non-representational and the 'new mobility paradigm' urge us not to subdue the world's animation, its continuing 'on-goingness',<sup>22</sup> spectrality can open our eyes to a sense of *obduracy* and the persistence of presences that somehow remain. Even as Edensor writes that the 'city endlessly moves on', he demonstrates that it 'leaves behind traces of its previous form, social life, inhabitants, politics, ways of thinking and being, and modes of experience', all of which may inflect social experiences and translate into new material affordances.<sup>23</sup> Maddern's piece further elaborates on how the past may be resurrected by less-than-dead presences that narrate and also disrupt the telling of history at odds with the commemorative practices of the state and its forward march. It is in this sense that spectro-geographies can move us to question efforts that enliven the world into immaterial practices and processes whilst forgetting the still, the stubborn and the static geographies of obdurate elements, immobilities and fixities.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, spectro-geographies may contribute to the increasing wealth of research regarding the *non-rational* and *affectual*.<sup>25</sup> Matless's article renders sites charged with magical qualities and spiritual associations, spatial encounters with affective electricity. Fear, anxiety and terror, or indeed awe, excitement and wonder are experienced and felt sometimes beneath any conscious registering. As Holloway writes, there is a 'vitalism, livedness' and 'often a sheer sensuousness'<sup>26</sup> to these comings-together. And thus, by attending to the materiality of ghostly geographies we must seek to examine their immateriality.<sup>27</sup> Ghostly geographies warp perceptions of time and space. Fears and phobias disturb the ordinary and the expected as *projections* of objects, things and events cast long shadows. And yet, and related to the previous point, we must be careful not to presuppose a given *vitalism* to spectro-geographies. Even as it has the capacity to awaken a previously inanimate world with affective intensity, spectral relations must be able to invoke a sense of lessening, slowing, lingering, deadening, vulnerability, loss of hope, boredom and withdrawal; and unpick the absences that make these states a reality.<sup>28</sup>

Much of geography, Thrift and Dewsbury once lamented, has seemed 'to follow the logic of the corpse; a geography interested in the broken, the static and the already passed',<sup>29</sup> in a way that makes the world 'play dead'. Studies of the spectro-geographical, the hidden politics that haunts spaces in intimate and complex ways, can continue to animate silenced agencies and forgotten voices and histories, while also attending to the political aspects of those voices and histories.<sup>30</sup>

But at the same time, spectro-geographies may help us not to move *too far* in arousing the world. We should be careful not to forget the lifeless geographies of 'the broken, the static and the already passed'. Live geographies, let's make them dead again.

## Biographical notes

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## Notes

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